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ABSTRACT

This study examined the hypothesis that the reason people believe the two sexes have different personality traits is because they enact roles that vary in power. Men usually enact a dominant role, expressing personality traits of self-assertion or agency, while women usually enact a subordinate role, expressing the personality traits of accommodation or communion. An earlier study had college students read a description of a married couple in which either the husband or the wife was described as the leader. As predicted, whichever spouse was described as the leader was perceived by the students as being highly self-assertive while the other spouse was seen as being highly accommodating. The next study tested the hypothesis that power-related roles in marriage lead to gender stereotyping by examining whether the roles in violent marriages could also explain gender stereotyping. College students read a description of a married couple and then rated both husband and wife on gender-stereotyped personality traits. In one condition, the husband was described as violent toward his wife; in the other, the roles were reversed. The results revealed that when the husband was described as violent, both he and the wife were perceived in a traditionally stereotyped way. When the conventional power relationship was reversed, the gender stereotypes were also reversed. (NB)

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Gender Stereotypes and Power: Perceptions of the Roles in Violent Marriages*

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Gender Stereotypes and Power: Perceptions of the Roles in Violent Marriages

One of the beliefs about women and men is that they have different personality traits. Research has shown that people usually agree on the traits they think are typical of the two sexes. These characteristics are called the "gender stereotyped traits." The traits that characterize women are called "communion;" those that characterize men are called "agency." These personality characteristics are described on the first page of your Handout, as "Positive Communion" and "Positive Agency."

When we say that women are believed to be high in communion, this means they are primarily concerned with responding and accommodating to the needs of other persons. For example, women are thought to be "warm," "understanding," and "sensitive to the needs of others. When we say that men are believed to be high in agency, this means they are primarily concerned with enhancing their own selves and exerting their will on others. For example, men are thought to be "assertive," "independent" and "willing to defend their own beliefs."

Various theories have been proposed to explain why the two sexes appear to have dissimilar personalities. One theory says that this is a result of biological differences between the sexes. Another theory says that it is due to differences in the ways females and males are socialized in their early years.

Yet another explanation, and the one that is being tested here, is that apparent sex differences in personality are a result of the roles that men and women enact with one another--roles that vary in power. People observe the two sexes enacting different roles, and as a result, observe them behaving in

different ways. They then assume that the two sexes have dissimilar personalities without realizing that these apparent dissimilarities are caused by the roles that they play. For example, the man usually acts the role of leader in a relationship with a women and so he appears to be highly assertive. The woman acts the role of follower and so she appears to be extremely accommodating.

The major roles that women and men enact in their adult life involve marriage. Within the marriage relationship, men generally exercise more power than women. This power can be expressed in many ways. Generally, it involves persuasion and influence, which is expressed through the mutual responsiveness of husband and wife. However, it can sometimes involve the use of violence, which is expressed through coercion and control.

This research has been concerned with testing the following hypothesis: The reason that people believe the two sexes have different personality traits is because they enact roles that vary in power. Men usually enact a dominant role, and so they express personality traits of self-assertion (or agency). Women usually enact a subordinate role, and so they express the personality traits of accommodation (or communion).

One way of testing this hypothesis is to make the roles that are associated with the two sexes explicit, rather than implicit. Research has shown that when this is done, these assigned roles then determine the way both sexes are perceived.

An earlier study tested whether gender stereotyping could be explained by the leader-follower roles that women and men enact within the marriage relationship.

College students read a description of a married couple and then were asked to indicate what personality traits characterized the husband and what personality traits characterized the wife.

In one condition, the husband was described as the leader in the marriage. As predicted, both the husband and the wife were then perceived in a traditionally stereotyped way. Subjects described the husband as being high in positive agency (or self-assertion) and the wife as being high in positive communion (or accommodation). The critical test of the hypothesis involved a condition in which the conventional roles were reversed and the wife was described as the leader. As predicted, the gender stereotyped traits were also totally reversed. The wife was the one who was perceived as being highly self-assertive and the husband was the one who was seen as being highly accommodating.

The next study to be described is the one that we are most concerned with here. This experiment was a further test of the hypothesis that power-related roles in marriage lead to gender stereotyping. Here, the hypothesis was that the roles in violent marriages could also explain gender stereotyping.

Marital violence is a form of power, which involves coercion and control. It is one way of exercising power that occurs in some American families. U.S. statistics on violence have shown that when victimization occurs in marriage, it is the wife who is injured 95% of the time. Such acts of violence are

carried out by the husband, usually in order to establish and maintain his power over the wife.

Thus, the hypothesis was as follows: In violent marriages, the husband is usually the more powerful aggressor and the wife is the less powerful victim. As a consequence, the husband would be perceived as high in agency and the wife would be seen as high in communion.

It was also predicted that these roles would affect the positive as well as the negative gender stereotyped traits.

Most of the research and theorizing about personality differences between the sexes has focussed on the socially desirable characteristics that have already been described--positive agency and positive communion. However, there are aspects of agency and communion that are socially undesirable. These negative traits are defined on Page 1 of the Handout.

The positive form of agency involves enhancing one's self and expressing one's own needs. In contrast, the negative form of agency involves an excessive self-concern that has as its goal the mastery, subjugation, and even destruction of others. For example, it includes the traits "domineering," "dictatorial," and "egotistical."

The positive form of communion involves concern for others and accommodation to the needs of other persons. In contrast to this, the negative form of communion involves an excessive selflessness in which the individual sacrifices the self for others thereby becoming emotionally and personally vulnerable. For example, it includes the traits, "helpless," "vulnerable," and "overly sensitive."

The procedure in this second experiment was similar to the one that has already been discussed. College students were asked to read a description of a married couple and then rate both the husband and the wife on the gender stereotyped personality traits. In one condition, the husband was described as violent towards his wife. In another condition, the roles were reversed, and the wife was described as violent towards her husband.

The husband-violent condition will be used to give you an example of the description that was presented to the subjects. Subjects read the following paragraph: "Imagine that you are going to meet a couple, Bob and Ann, for the first time. The only things you know in advance are that they are an adult man and an adult woman, they are married to one another, and Bob is violent towards Ann."

After the subjects read the description, they were asked to indicate what kinds of personality traits characterized the husband and the wife. For positive agency and communion, they rated each person on traits from the short form of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory. For the negative traits, they rated each person on a scale consisting of socially undesirable traits that was developed by other investigators.

Ratings of stimulus persons on each of the gender stereotype traits were analyzed using repeated measures analyses of variance.

Again, the results supported the hypothesis, and are presented in the table on Page 3 of your Handout. When the husband was described as violent towards his wife, both he and the wife were perceived in a traditionally stereotyped way. Subjects characterized the husband as being high in agency and the wife as being high in communion--and this was on the positive as well

as the negative traits. When the conventional power relationship was reversed and the wife was described as violent towards her husband, the gender stereotypes were also reversed. Contrary to people's usual beliefs, the wife was perceived as being high in agency and the husband was seen as being high in communion.

To describe the results in a somewhat different way: A violent person of either sex was seen as having the personality traits of the "typical man," and an abused person of either sex was seen as having the personality traits of the "typical woman."

In addition to these overall results, which supported the hypothesis, some sex differences were found: The abused woman was somewhat lower on positive agency and somewhat higher on negative communion than the abused man. Multiple regression analyses showed that these apparent sex differences could be explained by the greater physical aggression associated with the violent man in comparison with the violent woman. Subjects perceived the abused woman as being the target of greater physical aggression than the abused man. Consequently, they also saw her as somewhat less able to assert herself and somewhat more helpless and vulnerable.

I would like to go back now and describe the results for the negative gender stereotyped traits, a little more extensively. These results are what you might have expected.

The violent person was perceived as being high in negative agency and low in negative communion. This meant that the violer. person was seen as being extremely domineering and dictatorial. As would be expected, this finding

corresponds with clinical observations of aggressors who have been found to manifest negative traits involving the domination of others.

The abused person was perceived as being high in negative communion and low in negative agency. Thus, the results showed that the abused person was perceived as extremely helpless and vulnerable, as you would expect. Again, this result corresponds with clinical observations which have shown that victims react to acts of aggression by manifesting the negative traits of helplessness and vulnerability.

The results for the positive traits might appear, at first glance, to be somewhat surprising.

The violent person was found to be high in positive agency. This means that the aggressor was seen as having the socially desirable traits of self-assertiveness and independence. One might have expected that an aggressor would have been perceived in exclusively negative ways. However, clinical observations and research with actual people have shown that aggression can often be associated with socially desirable traits. People can use aggression to demonstrate self-worth and get respect and approval from others. Furthermore, research has shown that many people still believe that certain forms of marital violence are at least somewhat necessary, normal, or good.

Another finding that might appear to be surprising was that the abused person was perceived as high in positive communion. This means that the abused person was seen as expressing a great deal of warmth and concern. Again, this result is consistent with clinical observations of abused persons,

which show that victims frequently express warmth and concern for their aggressor's welfare.

In summary, the present study extended findings from previous research to show that different kinds of power lead to the perception of women as communal and men as agentic. Such power can include the roles of leader and follower, shown in previous research, as well as the roles of violent and abused persons, shown in the present study.

GENDER STEREOTYPES AND POWER: PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLES IN VIOLENT MARRIAGES*

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POSITIVE GENDER STEREOTYPED TRAITS

Positive Agency:

Socially desirable personality traits that involve enhancing an individual's self and the expression of one's own needs.
Examples are "assertive," "independent," and "defends own beliefs."
These traits are believed to be more characteristic of men than women.

Positive Communion:

Socially desirable personality traits that involve being concerned about other people as well as responding and accommodating to the needs of others.
Examples are "warm," "understanding," and "sensitive to the needs of others."
These traits are believed to be more characteristic of women than men.

NEGATIVE GENDER STEREOTYPED TRAITS

Negative Agency:

Socially undesirable personality traits that involve an excessive self-concern that has as its goal the mastery, subjugation, and even destruction of others.
Examples are "domineering," dictatorial," and "egotistical."
These traits are believed to be more characteristic of men than women.

Negative Communion:

Socially undesirable personality traits that involve an excessive selflessness in which the individual sacrifices the self for others thereby becoming emotionally and personally vulnerable.
Examples are "helpless," "vulnerable," and "overly sensitive."
These traits are believed to be more characteristic of women than men.

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*Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, New York, NY, April, 1991.

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Abstract

Men are generally observed to exercise more power than women within the marriage relationship. One way of expressing such power is through the roles in violent marriages, in which the man is usually the more powerful, violent person and the woman is the less powerful, abused person. This research tested the hypothesis that roles differing in power can explain why men are believed to be high in agency and women to be high in communion. Agency involves both positive traits (self-assertiveness) and negative traits (motivated to master and subjugate others); communion involves positive traits(accommodation and concern for others) as well as negative traits (excessive selflessness and vulnerability). College students rated stimulus persons on the gender stereotyped traits. In one condition, the husband was described as violent towards his wife, and in another condition, the traditional power relationship was reversed and the wife was described as violent towards her husband. On both the positive and negative traits, violent women and men were perceived as high in agency and low in communion. Abused men and women were seen as high in positive communion and low in positive agency, although the abused woman was lower in positive agency than her male counterpart. For abused women and men, the hypothesized results were found for negative agency, but not all of the expected findings were obtained for negative communion. The sex differences that were found could be explained by differences in the perceived physical aggression inflicted by violent men and women.

TABLE 1

MEAN RATINGS OF VIOLENT AND ABUSED PERSONS ON THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE GENDER STEREOTYPE TRAITS

Type of trait and sex of aggressor	Violent person		Abused person	
	Communion	Agency	Communion	Agency
Positive traits				
Man is aggressor	2.6	5.3	5.1	2.5
Woman is aggressor	3.3	5.3	5.3	3.1
M	3.0	5.3	5.2	2.8
Negative traits				
Man is aggressor	3.0	5.3	4.6	2.4
Woman is aggressor	3.1	5.1	3.7	2.6
M	3.0	5.2	4.1	2.5

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